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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001435

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: SAMIR GEAGEA ON AOUN'S ARMS, PRESIDENCY

REF: BEIRUT 1422

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d),

SUMMARY

1. (S) In a one-on-one meeting on 9/17, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea complained to the Ambassador that the LAF is looking the other way as Michel Aoun, Hizballah, Suleiman Franjeh, and other pro-Syrians establish plans for an armed takeover of Lebanon. He claimed credible information about Franjeh being the conduit passing arms from Hizballah to Aoun and said that, as one example, Aoun forces will join with Hizballah and anti-Jumblatt Druse to sever the Damascus highway as part of the response, should March 14 elect a president. In contrast to fellow March 14 leader Saad Hariri (reftel), Geagea was relaxed about Boutros Harb's campaign strategy. While he gave Harb only a 10-15 percent chance of success in winning Berri's backing for the presidency, it was a strategy worth trying. Yes, Nassib Lahoud is the better March 14 candidate, Geagea said. But if Harb would be elected by consensus with Berri, he would be in a stronger position than Lahoud, who would come to power weakened by a contested election. Geagea expressed annoyance with Patriarch Sfeir for going along with Nabih Berri's pretension that he can set the list of acceptable presidential candidates. End summary.

MARCH 8-AOUN FORCES SAID TO BE  
PREPARING FOR OFFENSIVE MILITARY ACTION  
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2. (S) The Ambassador met privately with Samir Geagea in the Lebanese Forces stronghold of Bsharre, a town in north Lebanon, on 9/17 before a lunch with local officials attended by both. Geagea, with his usual intensity, zeroed in on what he insisted were tangible plans, training, and weapons distribution by pro-Syrian forces for a forcible military take-over of Lebanon. Claiming to have inside sources, Geagea said that Michel Aoun, Hizballah, Marada chief Suleiman Franjeh, Druse opposition figures Talal Arslan and Wi'am Wihab, and other pro-Syrians like Zahar Khatib were preparing their followers for militia-type street action to cut March 14 strongholds off from one another. Many things could spark putting this plan into action, Geagea said, but the election of a March 14 president without the presence of two-thirds of the parliamentary members would be the most likely.

HIZBALLAH ARMS ALLEGEDLY  
GO TO AOUN VIA FRANJIEH

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13. (S) Geagea said that Hizballah is being careful to avoid direct military support to Aoun, which, if discovered, would discredit Aoun with the Christians and Hizballah (with its claims that its arms are directed against Israel only) more generally. Instead, Hizballah is providing arms to Franjieh.

Franjieh then opens his arsenals to Aoun, making the arms transfers, if leaked, appear to be one Christian opposition leader helping another with personal protection. One of the main recipient of the arms from Franjieh is MP Selim Aoun, an Aoun bloc MP on Ily Skaff's Zahleh list. Selim Aoun is charged with distributing the arms to others in the Aoun camp and has established strategically located cells of 50-70 fighters each. Franjieh is providing some of the training facilities and has recently opened Marada offices far beyond its Zghorta headquarters in order to serve as rallying and training points as well as safehouses. Zahar al-Khatib plays a key training role of Aounist fighters, again in order to keep Hizballah somewhat at arms distance from Aoun.

ONE EXAMPLE OF MARCH 8-AOUN PLANS:  
ISOLATING JUMBLATT'S FIGHTERS  
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14. (S) When ordered into action, the cells will immediately cut off roads and communication links, to divide and isolate March 14 groups from one another. As only one example in what he said was a long list of plans, Geagea described how Walid Jumblatt's fighters would be bottled up. In a detailed account, Geagea said that Aoun forces in Kahali (along the Damascus highway, above Aley) have operational plans to join forces with Arslan's anti-Jumblatt Druse forces in Aley in

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order to sever the Damascus highway just above Beirut. Hizballah, helped by Selim Aoun's forces in Zahle, will cut off the Biqa' valley end of the road. At the same time, Arslan's people will join with the PFLP-GC and Hizballah to cut the southern highway out of Beirut south of the airport. This will prevent Walid Jumblatt's Druse fighters from being able to reach Beirut from the Chouf and west Biqa'. Hizballah, while part of this, will attempt to stay in the background, using, for example, orange shirts in the Zahleh area to imply that the Aounists are more numerous than they are.

GEAGEA CLAIMS LAF KNOWS  
BUT CHOOSES TO DO NOTHING  
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15. (S) Geagea expressed deep frustration with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). G-2 (army intelligence) chief Georges Khoury is aware of these plans. Not only has Geagea shared his information, but Khoury has his own confirmation. But the LAF is doing nothing. If the LAF would raid a single safehouse of Selim Aoun, for example, it would put a chill through the entire operation. But the LAF has too many Aoun sympathizers within its officer ranks to move against what Aoun is doing. Geagea claimed to have pushed for Zahar Khatib (once close to Jumblatt but now a staunch ally of Syria) to be pulled in for questioning, as a fall-back to questioning Aoun's followers. But the LAF refuses to move.

16. (S) The Ambassador suggested that the LAF may be looking at weapons distributions by Aoun, Jumblatt, Franjieh, and Geagea himself as all part of the same pattern of increased personal protection and preparedness. Shaking his head, Geagea said that, were the LAF to look into the weapons distribution by Aoun and Franjieh, they would see offensive, not defensive, plans. If the LAF would call in some of Aoun's weapons distributors, such as Selim Aoun, for questioning, then all of the arms dealing would decrease. Geagea asked for USG pressure on the LAF to respond to the growing threat: "they (the March 8-Aoun forces) already have an army, Hizballah. Now they're building another army (the

alleged arming of Aoun forces). They can't have the LAF, too." (We note that Georges Khoury has recently expressed anger and bitterness about March 14 complaints regarding LAF performance; Geagea's comments are surely among the type that annoy Khoury.)

HARB'S FLIRTATION WITH BERRI:  
METHOD IN HIS MADNESS  
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¶7. (S) The Ambassador asked Geagea about the presidential race. Geagea repeated the familiar two-pronged March 14 strategy: to welcome unconditional dialogue to seek a consensus candidate, while simultaneously shoring up March 14 ranks in preparation of electing Nassib Lahoud with an absolute majority (but without two-thirds quorum) if attempts to find a consensus candidate fail. He expressed concern, however, about whether Mohammed Safadi and the Tripoli MPs would be with March 14 when needed. The Ambassador asked, realistically, who would be acceptable consensus candidates for March 14. Maybe Charles Rizk, Geagea said, but certainly not LAF Commander Michel Sleiman. He expressed some concern about whether Saad Hariri might be willing to do a deal regarding Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, whom Geagea dismissed as too close to the Syrians.

¶8. (S) The Ambassador asked whether Geagea thought Boutros Harb's current, exaggerated courtship of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri might make Harb acceptable to the March 8-Aoun forces. Unlike Saad Hariri's concern (reftel), Geagea said that he was not worried about the constant verbal bouquets Harb throws Berri's way. While he judged Harb to only have 10-15 percent chance of getting Berri on board, it was worth trying. If Harb can be elected as a consensus candidate with two-thirds quorum, then everybody is better off. Harb starts out his presidency with sufficient credibility and backing to work. Nassib Lahoud, on the other hand, is a better candidate, "the best," Geagea said (reversing his previous ranking, which put Harb above Lahoud). But Nassib, despite his fortitude, would be at a great disadvantage in taking office, if half the country questions his legitimacy and the March 8-Aoun forces militarily take over sections of the country. Better to have Harb, if he can win consensus.

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PATRIARCH SFEIR: DON'T  
GIVE HIM TOO MUCH CREDIT  
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¶9. (S) Asked whether he had seen Maronite Patriarch Sfeir since his return from the Vatican, Geagea said no. He did not plan to see the Patriarch, at least not publicly, for some time. The Patriarch is too old and too fearful. He should never have accepted the concept, a "terrible precedent," that the Parliament Speaker can establish the list of presidential candidates. Geagea said that he did not want to play up the Patriarch's role or give him too much credit, for fear that it would then be that much more difficult to walk away from any deal Berri claims to have struck with the Patriarch.

COMMENT  
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¶10. (S) It is difficult for us to evaluate the competing claims of militias being formed (or re-formed) and armed (or re-armed). We cannot draw definitive conclusions from Geagea's account alone (although Geagea is not the only person to claim Aoun is doing more than simply preparing for self-defense). We expect that, to some extent, almost everyone is preparing himself and his bloc for the worst. But, whatever their motives, Jumblatt and Geagea operate under constraints. They do not have the financial resources or network of smuggling methods and routes available to Hizballah. What Jumblatt and Geagea spend on weapons would

come at the expense of party-building, patronage, etc., in a zero-sum financial game. By contrast, what Geagea claimed Aoun is doing is far different and more dangerous: if Hizballah is simply giving Aoun weapons via Suleiman Franjeh, then Aoun has access to relatively unlimited supplies. And Aoun can devote the funds available to him to other purposes. If Geagea's claims are true, the playing field of physical/military power on the ground is certainly tilted in favor of the March 8-Aoun bloc, especially if (as in the January 23 riots) the LAF plays only a passive role.

FELTMAN